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ABSTRACT

Overwhelming scientific and anecdotal evidence indicates that the elementary school experience significantly shapes children's lives. This report examines the history of elementary education, and describes alternatives such as nongraded schools. The first part of the report describes the roots of elementary education in the United States, highlights the role of the blackboard as facilitating group instruction, and describes the emergence of elementary school as a distinctive institution. It also discusses the characteristics and impact of the progressive movement, the impact of Sputnik on American education, and the "back to basics" movement. The report identifies "giant steps backward" in American elementary education. The second part of the report provides an overview of educational alternatives at the elementary level, with a focus on nongraded programs. It describes the educational goals, organizational framework, curriculum, and teaching methods for nongraded programs. Individually guided education is described as an outgrowth of nongraded programs. The report also describes the characteristics of magnet schools. Concluding that new models for elementary education may be proposed to meet the new demands and address the changing characteristics of American life, the report suggests that technology, national standards, interdisciplinary instruction and charter school are promising trends for elementary education in the near future. Contains 24 references. (Author/KB)

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# AN OVERVIEW OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE WITH ITS ORGANIZATION, NATURE OF PROGRAM AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

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## AN OVERVIEW OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE WITH ITS ORGANIZATION, NATURE OF PROGRAM AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

### Introduction

There is an overwhelming amount of scientific and anecdotal evidence that indicates that the elementary school experience is one of the most significant forces that shapes the lives of children. It is impossible to overstate the importance of a good elementary education in terms of building a foundation for a lifetime of school-related learning. Because of its nature, there has been due recognition given to it in the past and there are options/alternatives being tried at present providing future directions to elementary education.

The importance of elementary education in the lives of people has been stated by some authorities in the field of education. Goodlad and Shane (1973), for example, suggested that in quantitative terms elementary education enrolls the largest proportion of money spent on formal education and brings the largest return from this education investment to both the state and the individual. In qualitative terms the elementary school educates during the most critical and formative years. Similarly, Shribner and Knox (1973) pointed to the importance of elementary education that " the elementary school is the focus of attention for several reasons. First, it provides a formal and social success in society. Second, psychological study reveals that self-concepts are formed during childhood. The elementary school years appear to have a cumulative impact greater than other levels of schooling since boys and girls in urban environments may receive little or

may receive little or no secondary education but almost attend the full complement of elementary years"(p.327).

The purpose of the paper is to overview of elementary education: past, present, and future with special reference to its organization, nature of program and teaching strategies.

**From Past to Present**

In a book entitled Elementary School Organization and Administration, Otto (1964) mentioned that there is no federal system of education in the United States. Therefore, each state provides for public education through its constitution and status. He also stated that the local school district is a creature of the state, established by the state to do the states business and organization of the district and of the individual elementary school is controlled to some extent by the state. Similarly, organization within the individual school is shaped by the state. It can be said that the individual elementary school is an organization within organizations and have authority to do what is necessary to fulfill its responsibility.

The literature suggests that the roots of elementary education in the United States are deep and strong. Otto (1973) stated that " the numerous significant forms that are badly needed today in elementary education can draw on the ideas of the past. The ideas pioneered before 1900 may now seen dated, quaint, and prosaic, but our vision of tomorrow is all the clearer and the margin of our vision all the wider because we can stand on the branches that have grown from education's first roots in the New World" (p.59). Foshay (1973) addressed that " the elementary school can be seen as kind of

museum of past and present influences on practices" and also pointed out four main sources for elementary school practices:

- The cultural-political-theological context of the schools;
- A combination of traditional, ritualistic customs, some of which arise from common sense, some from unexamined beliefs;
- Implicit beliefs and theories concerning the child and his learning;
- Explicit learning theories.

Likewise, Lee (1973) suggested that some certain major beliefs concerning the nature of the man should be known in order to better understand the varied practices found in the elementary school. These major beliefs are the following:

- Man as inherently evil vs. man as inherently good;
- Man as a puppet of circumstances vs. man as mainly self determining;
- Man's actions as determined by the impact of a given situation vs. man's actions as the result of seeking to meet basic needs in the situation;
- The self-concept as of little importance vs. the self-concept as the most important aspects of the individual's progress toward achieving his maximum potential (p.138-139).

The author also mentioned that these beliefs have been widely accepted at one time or other and they succeeded in changing elementary schools in significant ways. "For example, the concept of the child's nature as passive led to the conclusion that children learned only what was presented to them and that it must be presented again and again until the desired reaction was attained" (154). And Foshay (1773) adds that " until the

present, most school practices were based not on theories of how children learn, but on implicit beliefs amount the nature of man" (p.180).

The literature suggests that since the early beginnings of public education private schools, church-related schools, and independent schools have been in existence and free, state-supported, schools were not a reality until the nineteenth century in the United States. Foshay (1973) reported that the context of the elementary school in the early history of the United States was in the main theological.

By the introduction of the blackboard around 1809 group instruction was facilitated in elementary schools. Until after 1880 teaching in elementary schools consisted mainly of hearing recitations of material that the students had learned or memorized from the meager supply of books that were available. Students were expected to read and reread their readers until they could do each page accurately. The acquisition of information frequently was a rote-learning process with understanding dependent on the student's own implicit perception and interpretation. The role of the teacher was to see that his young charges were kept busy. Maps, globes, blackboards, slates, pencils, pictures, and steel pens were nonexistence or in short supply until 1800. By 1830, textbooks had been written for practical ever subject that appeared in the curriculum of the elementary education (Lee, 1973; Otto, 1973).

By 1860 the elementary school had emerged as a distinctive institution. After this time the elementary school almost invariably was organized on a graded basis. The grades were associated with the ideas that there was a given amount of content that was to be learned at each grade level. If a student did not master the required amount, he/she had to repeat the grade. Some schools had a seven-year course, while others had an eight or nine-

year course. The instruction taught were varied and the programs had also began to change from religious to more secular programs (Otto, 1973).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the characteristics of American education were influenced by the progressive movement in American society ( Parkay and Hardcastle, 1990). The progressive school reform is based on the following assumptions:

- The content of the curriculum ought to be derived from students' interests rather than from the academic disciplines.
- Effective teaching takes into account the whole child, his or her interest and needs in regard to cognitive, affective, and psychomotor areas.
- Learning is essentially active rather than passive; effective teachers provide students with experiences that enable them to learn by doing.
- The aim of education is to teach students to think rationally so that they may become intelligent, contributing members of society.
- At school students learn personal, as well as social values.
- Humankind is in a constant state of change, and education makes possible a future that is better than the past (Parkay, et al., 1990, p.229).

The review of the literature suggests that by emerging the progressive movement the elementary schools gradually began to accept a progressive program of school reform. Cohen (1973) states that:

> By World War I educational progressives had arrived at a conception of a public school, especially at the elementary level, whose major functions were vastly expanded beyond formal instruction to encompass responsibilities formerly left to other agencies- a conception of the elementary school. By 1917, the elementary

schools had vastly enlarged their activities to take account of the physical, social, recreational, and vocational needs of children. In the 1920 school reformers went further by demanding that the elementary school assume responsibility for the child's social and emotional adjustment (p.70).

By the start of World War II and the Soviet Union's successful launching of the satellite Sputnik in 1957, the progressive education movement faced with rising public criticism, and began to decline ( Parkay, et al.,1990). Thus, during the sixties, confusion grew regarding the nature of good elementary school programs. Longstreet (1973) mentioned that " widely distributed information about science and mathematics projects made such concepts as " discovery" and invention" part of desirable instructional methodology, though the implicit thrust toward the personalized or child-centered curriculum was not explicitly recognized" (p.264).

The Sputnik shock in America led to new research and innovation in science, mathematics, modern foreign language and guidance. Moreover, teachers were trained in the use of new methods and materials, schools were given funds for new equipment, and research centers were established. However, the curriculum movement of the 1960s did not bear the positive results that its supporters hoped for (Parkay, et al., 1990). According to Bracey (1996) the Sputnik curriculum reforms of the 1960s extended to the elementary grades, but that was not their focus. He also mentioned that by the mid 1970, open education, an example of progressive reforms ( Walker and Soltis, 1992) had begun to give way to a back to basic movement in elementary schools.

Back to basic movement drive its concepts from the traditional point of view

( Hanif, Namaz, and Tanveer, 1979). The advocates of back to basic movement have demanded the following practices:

- Emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic in the elementary grades. Phonics is the method advocated for reading instruction (Brodinsky, 1985).
- At all levels, the teacher is to take a dominant role( Brodinsky 1985). The teacher controls the learning situations and design instructional activities (Hanif et al., 1979).
- Methodology is to include drill, recitation, daily homework, and frequent testing (Brodinsky 1985).
- The criteria for the evaluation of instructional outcomes are determined by the teacher who is also main source of information, knowledge, and direction (Hanif, et al., 1979).
- The school program is characterized by self-contained classrooms, competitive grades, rigid scheduling, home work based on the textbook, compartmentalized subject areas, external enforced discipline, and formalized instructional activities ( Hanif, et al, 1979).
- Eliminate frills- clay modeling, weaving, doll construction, flute practice, volleyball, sex education (Brondinsky, 1985).

In their article entitled Open Education Versus Back to Basics: An Analysis of the Issues Hanif, et al., (1973) mentioned that:

> While open education is still in search of valid, consistent, and genuine instructional models, efforts in this direction are progressing. Models of traditional education are also in the process of change as a result of their contact

with the free flow of humanistic ides. Educators are questioning the old closed-end maximally structured, highly formalized models of instruction. Back to basics is only a transitory reaction aimed at conserving elements of the past that served education in a different time context (p.108).

It can be said that each reform movement that may well have been in elementary education and resulted in a number of improvements that have lasted into the present. However, Palardy ( 1991) stated that there have been six giant steps backward in elementary education in the United sates. These are:

- One step backward in elementary education is the placement of diagnostic discipline with behavior modification.
- A second step backward in elementary education during the course of the past twenty years is the increased emphasis in reading instruction on decoding skills, particularly those of phonics and structural analysis.
- A third step backward in elementary education during the past two decades is the narrowing of the concept of individualized instruction.
- A fourth step backward is the movement away from relative mastery learning to absolute mastery learning.
- A fifth step backward in elementary education in the past twenty years is the movement away from self-contained, heterogeneously grouped classes to departmentalized, homogeneously grouped classes.
- A sixth step backward in elementary education is the movement away from education whole children to a concern for educating their intelligence(149-152).

Likewise, Bracey (1996) stated that " the old French proverb, the more things change, the more they remain the same, comes to mind in looking at elementary education over the last 75 years" (p.26) and said " I noted the remarkable continuity of elementary education over the years, in contrast to the many changes undergone by secondary education ( 1996, p. 7).

**Options/Alternatives in Elementary Education**

Alternatives in American education is extensive and stretches backward into American educational history and the options within alternative education vary in their shapes, goals, attendance policies, curriculum, size, teaching methods, instructional resources and/or regulations. Alternative schools also have different titles such as open schools, educational parks, dropout centers and others ( Tanveer and Nawaz, 1979). Because there are numerous of alternatives throughout the country it is difficult to review each of those alternatives. For example, Catalog of School Reform Models: First Edition, Hypertext Version provides information on 26 entire-school or whole-school alternative models and 18 skill-and content-based model (Online, Available: http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/natspec/catalog/index.html ). Therefore, this paper provides an overview of some alternative /options that are prevalent at elementary level.

**The Non-graded Schools:**

The non-graded elementary school movement was popular in the 1950's, 60's and early 1970's, still has relevance and the non-graded elementary school itself is reappearing today. "A non-graded elementary program is one in which students are flexibly grouped according to performance level, not age, and proceed through the

elementary school at their own rates". The non-graded program, frequently, applies only to the grades 1-3 or K-3 ( Gutierrez and Slavin, 1992, p. 1). Giaconia and Hedges (1982) (Cited in Gutierrez, et al., 1992) stated that non-graded programs increasingly implemented in schools without classroom walls, and tended to be called open schools rather than non-graded elementary schools. By adapting from the dissertation of Barbara Pavan, Goodlad and Anderson (1987) summarized the goals and principles of non-graded programs as following:

I. Goals of Schooling:

1. The ultimate school goal is to develop self-directing autonomous individuals.
2. The school should help develop individual potentialities to the maximum possible.
3. Each individual is unique and is accorded dignity and respect. Differences in people are valued. Therefore, the school schould strive to increase the variability of individual differences rather than stress conformity.
4. Development of the child must be considered in all areas: aesthetic, physical, emotional, and social, as well as intellectual.
5. Those involved in the school enterprise are co-learners, especially teachers and students.
6. The school atmosphere should allow children to enjoy learning, to experience work as pleasurable and rewarding, and to be content with themselves.

I. Administrative- Organizational Framework:

A. Vertical Grouping

7. Each individual works in varied situations where he or she will have opportunities for maximum progress. There are no procedures for retention or promotion, nor any grade levels.
8. A child's placement may be changed at any time if it is felt to be in the best interests of the child's development considering all five phases of development: aesthetic, physical, intellectual, emotional, and social.

B. Horizontal Grouping

9. Grouping and sub-grouping patterns are extremely flexible. Learners are grouped and regrouped on the basis of one specific task and are disbanded when that objective is reached.
10. Each child should have opportunities to work with groups of many sizes, including one-person groups, formed for different purposes.
11. The specific task, materials required, and student needs determine the number of students that may be profitably engaged in any given educational experience.
12. Children should have frequent contact with children and adults of varying personalities, backgrounds, abilities, interests, and ages.

II. Operational Elements:

A. Teaching Materials-Instructional

13. A wide variety of textbooks, trade books, supplemental materials, workbooks, and teaching aids must be available and readily accessible in sufficient quantities.

14. Varied materials must be available to cover a wide range of reading abilities.

15. Alternate methods and materials will be available at any time so that the child may use the learning style and materials most suitable to his or her present needs and the task at hand ( including skill building, self-teaching, self-testing, and sequenced materials).

16. A child is not really free to learn something she or he has not been exposed to. The teacher is responsible for providing a broad range of experiences and materials that will stimulate many interests in the educational environment.

B. Curriculum (knowledge)

17. The unique needs, interests, abilities, and learning rates, styles, and patterns of each child will determine his or her individual curriculum. Conformity and rigidity are not demanded.

18. The curriculum should be organized to develop the understanding of concepts and methods of inquiry more than specific content learning.

19. Process goals will be stressed: the development of the skills of inquiry, evaluation, interpretation, application " the skills of learning to learn."

20. Sequence of learning must be determined by each individual student and his or her teacher since:

(a) no logical or inherent must sequence is in the various curriculum areas.

(b) no predetermined sequence is appropriate to all learners.

(c) individual differences in level of competence and in interest are constantly in flux.

21. Each child will formulate his or her own learning goals with guidance from his or her teachers.

C. Teaching Methods

22. Different people learn in different ways.

23. Learning is the result of the student's interaction with the world she or he inhabits. Individuals learn by direct experience and manipulation of their environment; therefore the child must be allowed to explore, to experiment, to "mess around," to play, and have the freedom to err.

24. The process is more important than the product. How the child learn is stressed.

25. All phases of human growth-aesthetic, physical, intellectual, emotional, and social- are considered when planning learning experiences for a child.

26. The teacher is a facilitator of learning. She or he aids in the child's development by helping each one to formulate goals, diagnose problem areas, suggest alternative plans of action; provides resource materials and gives encouragement, support, or prodding as needed.

27. Children should work on the level appropriate to present attainment and should move as quickly as their abilities and desires allow them to.
28. Successful completion of challenging experiences promotes greater confidence and motivation to learn than fear of failure.
29. Learning experiences based on the child's expressed interests will motivate the child to continue and complete a task successfully much more frequently than teacher-contrived techniques ( p. xv-xvii).

In their review of the research on the academic achievement effects of the non-graded schools Gutierrez, et all., (1992) concluded that non-graded organization has a positive impact on student achievement if it allows teachers to provide direct instruction to students outside of the framework of individualized instruction.

**Individually Guided Education**

The non-graded program resulted in a one important result, Individually Guided Education. It was developed and researched at the University of Wisconsin (Anderson, 1992). " Individualized instruction means personalizing of the instructional process to meet the individual needs and abilities of each learner" (Nawaz and Tanweer, 1977, p. 22).

Individually Guided Education uses a non-graded grouping strategy, in which students are flexibly grouped according to instructional needs rather than age. Individual plans are prepared for each student, and students are constantly assessed to determine their continuing placements. Instruction can be delivered one-on-one by teacher or peers, to small groups , or to large groups. Often individual teachers are experts in a given

subject and take responsibility for that subject with the entire unit ( Gutierrez, et al., 1992).

Structural elements combined non-gradedness, multi-aged grouping, teaming, openness, flexibility, adaptability, and humaneness are important features of Individually Guided Education ( Nawaz, et all., 1977; Anderson, 1992).

**Magnet Schools**

The literature suggests that magnet schools grew out of changes in desegregation policy in the 1970s. Magnet schools were designed to promote integration and used race as the criterion for student selection. (Young, 1990). A magnet school is defined as a public school with any grades K through 12 that offers " whole-school" or " program-within-school" programs that have the following characteristics:

- A specialized curricular theme or method of instruction intended to attract students district-wide.
- At least some students who volunteered for admission and entered voluntarily (enrollment is not limited to neighborhood attendance zones).
- Racial/ ethnic enrollment goals or controls of some type (Blank and Archbald, 1992).

The idea of a magnet school is to attract and enroll students based on their interest in either a particular subject or career or to attract students because of a different instructional approach. Generally, magnet schools can be classified according to their instructional methods or their content. The range of alternatives in the instructional methods category is usually greatest in elementary magnet schools (Blank, et all., 1992).

In the report entitled First Lessons: A report on Elementary Education in America Bennett ( 1986) proposed that parents should have the right to choose their children's schools and advocated a nationwide magnet school system. By the 1981-82 school year 1,200 magnet schools were in operation. Approximately 60 percent of the options were at the elementary level ( Young, 1990).

**The Future of Elementary Education**

The elementary education has been shaped by changing character of American social, economic, cultural life; changing trends of thought, and increasing knowledge about learning . It seems that new models will be proposed for elementary education to meet the new demands and address the changing characteristics of American society life. As Young ( 1990) stated:

> The challenge facing public education in the 1990s and beyond is how to meet the varied demands and rising expectations for excellence in the social service sector and still deliver the traditional academic curriculum. It is questionable whether schools, as presently constructed, can successfully deliver everything expected of them. New educational institutions may be necessary to compensate for the missing social capital in children's lives ( p. 108).

There may be the backward steps and remarkable continuity in elementary education but looking for excellence will never end. In the coming century, Information Age, enormous increase in the use of technology will create new learning and teaching alternatives and will chance the structure of elementary education. As Bracey ( 1996)

states besides technology, national standards, interdisciplinary instruction and charter schools will be promising trends for elementary education in the near future.

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